

Oswald Spengler's Vision of the Chronological Evolution

A postscript by Uwe Topper, Berlin (2010)

"The greatest problem when researching pre-Columbus American cultures is their absolute chronology. Without a secure historical guide line as to velocity and duration of history of which dates are the outward sign, no real historic knowledge can be gained."

This is how Oswald Spengler in 1933 starts his paper *On the age of American cultures* (see Lit. 1). The construction of a chronology is complicated yet perhaps possible, he continues, because "the development of the American cultures is not isolated but forms part of world history in which all actions of singular cultures are interdependent."

This is the basic method of cultural morphological insight, which he developed in his famous book *The Decline of the West* (1918) to which he refers here directly (vol. II, p. 52). A decade later in the conference reviewed here he turns more explicit: the dates of modern chronology are unreliable. In his first great work (the just mentioned *Decline*), Spengler recognized that Justinian with his outstanding corpus of binding laws on the one side, and the beginnings of Islam with their likewise strict new rules and laws on the other, are somehow related, but did not point out then that the chronological order and traditional dates are no longer valid, except for underlining that every single time-span and culture has its own concept of figures. Now he jumps right into the heart of the problem saying (p. 139):

"As long as we occidentals had no idea of history apart from the Bible, the classic authors and our own chronicles, we got along with biblical chronology starting from creation. Within those 6000 years every known fact could be sorted in. Yet as archaeological excavations and the deciphering of inscriptions in Egypt, Babylon, Greece, China, and India since more than a century have yielded prehistoric finds, the old order serves no longer.

In consequence of the absence of real and well founded initiatives to start a chronology, and out of the Germanic proneness to infinity, pleasure rose that yielded high figures for everything which is not securely known. One lavishly furbished history with millenniums and prehistory with millions of years as long as one could find signs of an evolution."

This sounds ironical nowadays and even revolutionary. Spengler rejected the rebellion of Darwin who by his theological view saved his creed but attacked the Christian dogma. And Spengler goes on:

"This was driven both by a type of hidden intention to destroy Christian chronology in its theological sense, and by the desperate search of the school of Darwin to stick to the materialist and causative development of the species of animals and plants although within measurable time-span nothing of this kind could be observed"

Then Spengler shows that this vanity of eternity seems absurd:

“Indulging in great figures of years is over now. As soon as sound proof had been found, the sequence of millenniums dwarfed to human and natural dimensions. Now we will no longer locate the Egyptian pyramid of Cheops nor the first legendary Chinese emperors nor the Babylonian kings at a moment many millennia before Christ nor move the Spanish cave paintings tens of thousands of years up. Even the beginning of the Egyptian history as worked out by Eduard Meyer is now questioned by A. Schärft by some centuries on account of the life times of persons who served under the rule of the first dynasties, and the finds in tombs of Ur which had been dated to 4000 BC out of thirst for sensation by their discoverers are now put into plausible brackets to somewhere near 2600 BC. In China, discoveries of oracle inscriptions on bones and turtle backs and the excavations of Andersen prove that trustworthy history cannot exceed 1400 BC. Moreover, the method of Geers to calculate the real duration of the ice age counting Swedish varves has led to an enormous shortening of the hitherto fantastic suppositions. We thus reach time spans which correspond in speed and duration the nature of human life.”

These are the latest achievements after World War I as summoned by Spengler in an exemplary way which ends those speculations of the ‘chronology rebellion’ of the 19th century and sets a better founded time limit in accordance with cultural morphology of his contemporaries. Basically, he says, this fabulous uncontrolled number of years could have been cut down before:

“By knowledge of historiography one could have reached this point much earlier. Great epochs of world history do happen in extremely short moments. Complete change of artistic language which pre-historians usually reckon to take place in dozens of generations have happened always in two or three generations when considering well-known ages. Psychologically speaking it seems impossible that between Raffael and Bernini or between Lessing and Hölderlin might have passed a number of centuries. The evolution from Roman to Gothic architecture or from Rococo to Classicism has happened in less than a century. ... Big cities like the Egyptian Al Amarna or the Samarra of the Caliphs have been built and abandoned within one generation.”

Spengler uses Egypt as model for his theory and sharpens his arguments this way:

“For reasons of organic style development it is obvious that Eduard Meyer is right when he estimates that only 200 years have elapsed between the 6th and 12th dynasties and the same amount between the 12th and 18th, and Flinders Petrie is not, when he suggests 1700 years. Thus, real World History of high civilisations is bracketed into the comparable short span from 3000 BC onward, and only by this it receives organic form and necessity. Only by this way the enormous might and size of the convulsions appear in their unabashed stringency. Antique, Indian, and Chinese civilisations start more or less at the same moment after the middle of the second millennium which can be evidenced by the fact that the war chariot as superior weapon appears in all of them, and suddenly, at the same instant.” (Note 3)

I am not sure that the figures given in this printed version are the ones Spengler used in his speech because Anton Mirko Koktanek as well as Hildegard Kornhardt who edited posthumously his legacy and admittedly emended his texts in order to please their contemporaries may have changed the dates. Since 1995 when I passed this essay around

among colleges, we would shorten the given dates even more in accordance with what Spengler had meant.

In this line, Spengler gave a clear hint, as far as Ancient Egypt is concerned, in his speech delivered on October 2, 1924, on occasion of the Orientalist's Meeting in Munich: "Plan for a new Atlas antiquus" (printed in 1951, p. 96-104). With a phrase like a rock he pronounced his insight and showed how one has to progress when dating Ancient Egypt: "Originally Egypt had no natural boundary by a desert to the West."

We can imagine Ancient Egypt as state only if the valley of the Nile is abruptly fenced in on both sides, East and West, by deserts. Had the Nile in the time of the empire still had its surrounding land with forests and fertile soil where pastoral people (robbers!) and farmers lived, than the wars of the 'Middle Empire' against Syria or the subjugation of the 'New Empire' by Kambyes would be utterly incomprehensible. Egypt could not have had neighbours when we follow the picture common history draws. Being restricted to the narrow valley of the Nile is a basic assumption for its unique and individual cultural style.

From this we can deduce a chronological limit for the beginning of Ancient Egypt: Before the desertification of the Sahara and the Nubian Desert, an Egyptian Empire is not imaginable. From the magnificent rock art, both painted and sculpted, across the Sahara and Nubian Desert it is evident that before a comparatively short time the side valleys of the Nile had plenty of water, even the mountains were covered with forests and giraffes, elephants, and large herds of cattle, and many people crowded the landscape of today's desert areas. Few millennia ago – according to general knowledge even until after the Punic wars in the time of Roman rule – lions and elephants and plenty of grain from this region were exported to Europe. The Garamants drove their horse-drawn chariots to the other side of today's desert belt through green land down to Lake Chad. This cuts down to a few centuries the development of the Pharaonic Empire.

This assessment can perhaps be expressed in precise time intervals. How strong would Egyptian culture – especially writing and aesthetics – reach beyond the Nile Valley if it had not been kept in strict isolation? Should we not encounter in Fezzan or in the Kharga oasis or along the Red Sea and on Sinai the witnesses of this culture in large numbers instead of isolated primitive remnants if these areas had been inhabitable while the Egyptian Ancient Empire flourished? And shouldn't the pharaohs have received their timber, for which they undertook wars of conquest and trade with Lebanon, more comfortably from the surrounding areas if the mountains along the Nile were still covered by forests? When did the surrounding area along the Nile dry that much that it was deserted and became a secure border? Two to three millennia ago, geologists say today. The Egyptian civilisation cannot be older than that.

The emergence of the Sahara has been triggered by a sudden event, i.e. the sudden uplift of the continental block. Desiccation of the landscape proceeded quickly and mercilessly, the survivors were hardly able to adapt and scarcely could flee; the camel nomads later reconquered a small living space in the desert. This sudden dehydration must have enabled the unique Ancient Egyptian civilisation, with its irrigation system and undisturbed peace. Its end came about just as suddenly, when a large tidal wave threw the temples to the ground and killed the people who could read hieroglyphics. We recall that Athanasius Kircher (17th century) found no one who could read or interpret those mysterious characters. This narrows the dating of ancient Egypt even further: between two catastrophes.

Spengler had dealt with this issue in detail too, but it would surpass the present short article. Instead, I will return to his initially mentioned article and quote his conclusion: "The ancient American cultures must be much younger."

By taking these cultures with their pyramids and running messengers (instead of wheeled chariots), with its high development and hierarchy of officials, it would settle them chronologically alongside the pharaonic culture, and thus the affinity of the two cultures becomes recognisable.

After a sharp rebuke to those scientists who dream of ancient observatories for which is no proof even in Babylonia, Spengler poses the question again:

"But how old it is the American culture really? An autochthonous historiography did not exist there and in any case it is lost to us. In Mexico, where the Maya and Aztecs form a unit of historical development, Spinden and other American scholars (see Note 4) tried to extract from chronological data on Maya stelae a relationship to West European reckoning which in my opinion was successful. This places the history of this culture in post-Christian times.

Relationships of this kind are missing for all civilisations further south which leaves us looking for external reports, e.g. from East Asia, in order to get some points of reference for the chronology of that part of the world. In case those are missing, too, we can only renounce the establishment of any historical order for them except for the last moments of the Inca empire. The narration Spanish monks delivered by telling about dynasties and kings are pure fantasy."

Spengler then turns to the Pacific area as a whole and "suggests", as he says himself, offering a "remote possibility" without which we would have to give up any objective historical knowledge. Starting from Japan with its not completely understood diversity of the early local population he suggests how the cultures on the west coast of America, especially Peru, are to be understood. By dating the Japanese culture which was even unknown to the Chinese, he wins clues for the young American cultures. "The ... traditional narratives of the early (Japanese) Empire are lost – as everywhere – in mythical mists, and traditional chronology, beginning with the legendary Jimmu around 700 BC, is wrong." The commencement can just be placed near the start of our Christian era, he declares.

The Korean-Chinese influence is likely to be non-existent at that time: instead, there is rather a "Malayan immigration" which he puts in quotation marks because by this vague expression nothing is gained. Spengler includes the entire width of the Pacific Ocean and cultural influence in Eastern direction to the American coast becomes possible, and thus the dating of the Central American high culture during the centuries from 800 to 1400, as American researchers suggested (see note 4). Spengler concludes cautiously:

"If all this should prove to be correct we would win in the old cultural areas of Peru, Ecuador and Colombia at least an approximate chronological approach and thus perhaps inaugurate a historical order of the cultural layers. In any case it would prove that here, as in Mexico, the actual development includes not much more than a millennium, and essentially the first millennium AD."

These conclusions aren't rejected today, they have led all later research.

Notes

1) reprinted in „Reden und Aufsätze“, Beck Verlag, München (1937; 3^o, 1951)

2) see Topper, Uwe (1998): Die »Große Aktion« (Tübingen) and (1999): Erfundene Geschichte (München, S. 128 ff).

3) see Spengler's essay: „Der Streitwagen und seine Bedeutung für den Gang der Weltgeschichte“ (1933) in „Reden und Aufsätze“ (1951, p. 148-152), and Topper, Uwe (2003): horra. Die ersten Europäer (Tübingen)

4) The Decline of the Occident (Untergang des Abendlandes, vol. II, p. 52, where he quotes the American authors: L. Spence, The civilisation of ancient Mexico, Cambr. 1912; and H. J. Spinden, A study of Maya art, its subject, matter and historical development, Cambr. 1913, who independantly tried to find a new chronology that would match the facts.“

More works used by Spengler as quoted in “The Decline of the Occident”:

Franke (1930): Geschichte des chinesischen Reiches

Scharff, A. (1927): Grundzüge der ägyptischen Vorgeschichte

Weidner and Christian (1929): Archiv der Orientforschung V (p. 139 ff)